

## The Hudson Review, Inc.

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Source: *The Hudson Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (Autumn, 1967), pp. 429-447

Published by: The Hudson Review, Inc.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3849761>

Accessed: 22/05/2010 21:58

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HAYDEN CARRUTH

## A Meaning of Robert Lowell

A BOOK REVIEWER LOOKING AT ROBERT LOWELL'S new book, *Near the Ocean* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$6.00), for the first time would find good reasons to be annoyed with it and to say so forcibly. The book itself, for one. It is a pretentious volume; printed on expensive paper, bound in heavy cloth and stamped in three colors, decorated with twenty-one drawings by Sidney Nolan, designed lavishly and wastefully in an outsize format, jacketed in varnished sixty-pound stock—in short, a very self-conscious-looking collector's item, which might easily provoke a reviewer into making a little investigation. He could learn without difficulty, for instance, that publication of the book had been postponed several times, and that the price had been announced progressively at \$4.95, \$5.50, and \$6.00. Why? Our reviewer would soon discover that the longest piece in the book, a translation of Juvenal's Tenth Satire, had appeared in a magazine version, in *Encounter*, only a few weeks before the book came out, and he would see significant differences between the two texts. He would surmise that last-minute revisions had been made in the poem—hence, very likely, the delays in publication—and he would wonder if other equally impetuous revisions had been made in other poems, especially the personal ones whose texts are spattered with ellipses. He would wonder also if the resetting of so much type had required the increases in price. He would read the note at the front of the book, in which Lowell, speaking of Nolan's drawings, says: "May my lines throw some light on his!"—apparently meaning that the poet hopes a certain reciprocity of example will ensue between texts and illustrations. But what a curious way to say it, what a slip of the two-edged pen. As for the drawings themselves; would indeed, our reviewer might exclaim, that the poems could illuminate them, they need it! Next he might look at the table of contents, where he would count the titles, seven poems and six translations, and wonder if readers should be asked to pony up six dollars for so small an offering

of untried work. Finally our reviewer would turn to the texts themselves, where he would find, first, an ill-assorted group of translations from classical and Renaissance poems, not Lowell's best, and second, among the original pieces—the slight heart of this slight book—one conventional tribute to Theodore Roethke and six personal poems: strange poems, not poorly written in the usual sense, on the contrary fairly glittering with the acuity and verbal shrewdness we expect from Lowell, and yet so awkward nevertheless, so fragmentary, devious, elliptical, and even stilted that they seem—well, to make the best of it, bewildering.

How could our reviewer fail to give the book an angry notice? Hifalutin ostentation: nobody likes it. All the less do we like it in contrast to Lowell's other books, which, in their quiet formats and with their modest crosshatch illustrations by Francis Parker on the title pages, make an attractive and more reasonable appearance. *Near the Ocean* looks unmistakably like a "big production" that was supposed—if not by Lowell, by someone—to catapult the poet into the cushiest seat in stardom; as if he weren't sitting there already. But by its own overreaching, it has failed.

Our reviewer, if he had an enquiring mind, would not be satisfied simply to blast the book's appearance, however. He would wish to find out why Lowell wrote these strange new poems, and what purpose their new style is intended to serve. In short, he would change himself, if he were able, from a reviewer into a literary critic. He would study all Lowell's work, he would divide, classify, elucidate, analyze, and compare, and he would give us a schematic judgment which might or might not be useful to us, and which might or might not have something to do with the poems.

Incidentally, if he were a proper scholar, he would begin his essay with a review of previous critical opinions, which in the case of Lowell's poetry comprise a truly splendid range: from servile adulation to contumelious rejection. Obviously this hodgepodge offers a great opportunity to a critic who fancies his own rhetorical prowess.

For my part, I am no critic. More's the pity perhaps, because I do find, like our hypothetical reviewer, that I am unwilling to rest on the simple distaste aroused in me by Lowell's new work,

a distaste which is uncertain, at that, inconsistent and unformed. I would like to know more. In consequence I must attack the poems in the only way I can, namely, as a fellow poet, someone who has worked the same side of the street for roughly the same period, and who presumably knows something about the difficulties of the job. This is what I propose to do, i.e., to look at the poems less as finished works than as objects coming into being. Indeed, for reasons I shall elaborate, I think this is the only way one can look at Lowell's work of the past fifteen years.

The risks in my method are great, of course. One is that I shall stray from my literary topic into what is normally considered personal or biographical. To those who may charge me with this, I give two answers. First, I shall not stray far because I do not know Lowell personally, having met him only twice, for a few minutes each time and at an interval of more than a decade. My knowledge of the man comes either directly or by inference from his own writing, and from what I have heard during twenty years on the edge of the literary world. Secondly, in dealing with poetry as personal as Lowell's, or as personal as most poetry written nowadays in America, the risk of infringing upon the poet's privacy is properly speaking no risk at all. An invitation has been extended to us: why shouldn't we accept it?

The place to begin then, I think, is with a biographical datum. Robert Lowell is, and for some years has been, the most envied poet in the country. The consequences of this are many, but for the moment I wish simply to enforce the fact. I envy Lowell. Everywhere I go among literary people I meet only others who envy Lowell. The reasons for it are obvious enough: his great advantages. First, the advantage of his birth in a distinguished family. One does not wish to insist on this, but at the same time it is not negligible. No doubt being born with a ready-made cultural and social status is sometimes a hindrance, but often it is a help too, and in our hearts most of us would be glad to put up with the one if we could thereby attain the other. Secondly, the advantage of talent and intelligence. I am not speaking of the particular concrete expressions of these properties, but of the properties themselves. From the first Lowell's poetry has had an inner force bespeaking his great native gifts. It has put him in

the class of wonder boys, along with poets like the early Auden and Dylan Thomas who, however idiotic they may sometimes look in other respects, were simply unable to write a trite or flaccid line. Most of us must cultivate poorer gardens. If we console ourselves with the idea that the best crop sometimes comes from meager soil, nevertheless we yearn often enough, in our adverse labor, for the facility of mere brilliance. Thirdly, the advantage of success. Let anyone say what he will, Lowell is our leading poet. It is a fact. He has power, influence, and an enormous reputation. His books, for example, are kept in print and they sell steadily—what a joy that must be! We all, I know, are reasonable creatures, and we realize that success is more often a nuisance than a blessing. But are we so inhuman that we deny our envy of those who have it? I hope not.

Envy is a tricky thing, of course. It takes many directions. At bottom it accounts, I believe, for ninety per cent of the critical response to Lowell's work, the wide range of opinions, and it accounts too for the concentration of responses at the extremes of the scale: adulators at one end, detractors at the other. As for the adulators . . . but why not call them by their right name, the flatterers? In their multitude we dismiss them; and we need add only that although their opinion in the long run may turn out to be right, and Lowell's poetry may be seen to be precisely as great as they say it is, if this happens it will be not because of, but in spite of, what they themselves are saying and doing now. The detractors, whose motives may be equally disreputable, are nevertheless forced by the nature of their position to take a more discriminative view, and hence their expressions of opinion may be actually helpful to us in making discriminations of our own. At least I shall go on that presumption.

Myself, after discounting as well as I can my own factor of envy, I find that my uncritical, workingman's response to Lowell's achievement changes from time to time but generally hovers between the two extremes. In each stage of his poetic evolution, Lowell has written a few poems that seem to me extremely fine, and he has also written poems that seem to me mannered, pointless, incomplete, and obscure. Indeed, try as I may—and I have tried again and again over the years—some of his poems, particularly his earliest and then again his latest, remain incomprehen-

sible to me, as dark and profuse as a pot of Bostonian whistles. Moreover, I cannot escape the feeling that some of this obscurity has been purposely, even crassly laid on.<sup>1</sup> For me, this is the single largest detracting element in his work.

One point, however, I wish to make perfectly clear. Lowell's position of leadership seems to me not only to have been earned but to be altogether suitable. I say this on two counts. As a man, Lowell has given us more than enough evidence of his firmness and integrity—one thinks of his conscientious objection during the war and all that it entailed, his refusal to attend White House sociables, and many other such actions—to substantiate his moral fitness for the role. As a poet, he gives us this same integrity in art. When I read his poetry, however negative my response may be to its effect, I know I am in the presence of an artist *in extremis*, operating, I should say struggling, at the limits of sensibility and technique. This is a quality which we consider peculiarly American, a kind of hardrock Yankee pertinacity, and to me it is peculiarly attractive. Who was it that said he would fight it out on this line if it took all summer? An American military man, I believe. When I read Lowell's lines, I feel that he has fought it out upon them for years. This is tough and homely and American. It is admirable. It is what leads me to place Lowell alongside William Carlos Williams, rather than in the company of other older poets to whom he bears a closer superficial resemblance. It is also what leads me, in the perennial confrontation of artists and the rest of the world, to rest content under his leadership. If my standing behind him will add to the strength of his position, he may be sure I am there.

So much for preliminary considerations. The phases of Lowell's poetic evolution are so well-known that I need indicate them only briefly. We may dismiss his first book, *Land of Unlikeness*, which was published in a limited edition that few people have seen; Lowell himself effectively dismissed it when he republished its main poems, considerably revised, in *Lord Weary's Castle*, the book that established him with one shot as a leader of his generation. Written in the first flush of enthusiasm after his conversion to Catholicism, the poems were highly charged devotional

<sup>1</sup> Lowell has admitted as much. See his *Paris Review* interview.

lyrics mixed with autobiographical elements, presented in an elaborate formal dress: close rhymes, exact meters, a heavy reliance on couplets, and an equally heavy reliance on the rhetoric of allusion. It was a virtuoso performance. At its best, in perhaps a fourth of the poems, it showed a young poet writing with genuine spontaneity in the strict forms of the English metaphysical convention, while bringing to them his own distinct voice and idiosyncratic manner. In short, Lowell had done what everyone had been saying could not be done: he had invented a new style. In his next book, *The Mills of the Kavanaghs*, he stuck with it, but most readers considered the book a falling-off, especially the long title poem. What this poem, a dramatic narrative in monologue, showed was that the ability to sustain narrative tension across the librations of discrete pentameter couplets is lost to us: the suspension bridge has replaced the viaduct.

Lowell waited eight years to publish his next book. Then, in 1959, he presented us with a change of appearance so radical that it seemed a reversal. The formal manner was gone; no pentameters, no rhymes, no ornate rhetoric. The book, called *Life Studies*, which more than recouped his reputation, gave us instead poems in open, loose measures, without rhyme, in a diction that seemed easy and almost insouciant. The heart of the book was a group of autobiographical poems so intensely candid that critics immediately called them "confessional"; an unfortunate choice of terms. It implied that Lowell was engaged in public breast-beating, a kind of refreshing new psycho-exotic pastime, or in a shallow exercise of "self-expression," long ago discredited; whereas in fact his aim was far more serious than that.

The following two collections of poems, *For the Union Dead* in 1964 and *Near the Ocean* this year, have continued to explore themes of autobiographical candor, but have gradually reverted toward formalism. Not the conventional formalism of *Lord Weary's Castle*, however. Now the meters, though basically iambic, are cast in rough lines of trimeter and tetrameter, punctuated with purposefully inexact rhymes. The diction is more extreme, more peculiar and concise, than in *Life Studies*, and the syntax has become progressively more taut, split up into smaller and smaller units. This has gone so far in the latest poems that one can scarcely find a complete sentence from stanza to

stanza, but only phrases, expletives, stabs of meaning. The effect, although entirely different from the high style of *Lord Weary's Castle*, nevertheless brings us back to an obscurity and artifice that seem to denote another reversal; the simplicity of *Life Studies* has been jettisoned.

In effect, Lowell made, in *Life Studies*, a considerable leap into a new area of poetic experience, which he has been exploring, since then, through increasingly elaborate means. Why he did this, what was in his mind, are questions readers must try to answer if they would understand the actual meaning of Lowell's experiment.

I have said nothing about the translations, perhaps because they are a source of embarrassment to me. Over the years Lowell has made a good many, including a couple of long ones and a whole book of short ones, from many languages, called *Imitations*. When this book was published in 1961, I reviewed it enthusiastically. The density and tonicity of the best translations took hold of me and persuaded me that Lowell had reached far toward the intrinsic qualities of the original poems, especially in his Baudelaires. Since then, my friends who know Baudelaire better than I have informed me with cogency that this is not true, and that I had no business reviewing such a book in the first place. Well, they are right on both counts, as I have ruefully come to see. Aside from the intended alterations of sequence and literal meaning which Lowell acknowledges, there is, for instance, the way in which Baudelaire's characteristic elegance, deriving from the fluent, almost sinuous build-up of stanzas and longer passages, is fragmented and rigidified in Lowell's choppy phrasings. And there is the way, too, in which Baudelaire's post-romantic sense of beauty is both reduced and roughened in its passage through Lowell's anguish-ridden, New Englander's sensibility; the flowers of evil become merely evil flowers—a considerable difference when you stop to think about it. Lowell's detractors seize on these points, and others, as ammunition for their campaign, which is made easier by the evident inferiority, when judged against any standard, of some of the translations. The Villons are quite bad, the Rimbauds and Pasternaks barely passable. But I continue to feel that the best of the Baudelaires, Rilkes, and Montales are excellent Lowells indeed, and this is all he had claimed for



them. He does not call them translations, but imitations. Perhaps he should have gone further and specified that what he was imitating was not the poetry of Baudelaire or Rilke or the rest, but the poetry of Lowell; perhaps he should have chosen another title, e.g., *Appropriations* or *Assimilations*. No matter; the point is that Lowell has made a perfectly legitimate effort to consolidate his own poetic view of reality by levying upon congenial authentications from other languages and cultures. The best of his translations go together with the best of *Life Studies* and *For the Union Dead* to comprise the nucleus of his mature work, the organic unity of which must be apprehended by those who wish to form reliable judgments.

Even at the most superficial level of technique, the prosodic level, Lowell's evolution, both his successes and his failures, offers a fascinating study to people who are interested in the disciplines of poetry. This is usually the case when important poets change styles. Consider Lowell's commonest prosodic device, the suspended or Hopkinsian upbeat produced by ending a line on the first syllable of a new unit of syntax, a phrase or sentence. He made it work well, not to say famously, in his early poems, but when he abandoned strict pentameters he had more trouble with it. How do you employ this very useful concept of metrical enjambment when your line-structure has been purposely unfixed? It is the old story: you can't have your cake and eat it too. Simple as it appears, this is a crucial problem, perhaps *the* crucial problem, of contemporary unmetered poetry, which different poets have met in many different ways. Some have adopted the practice of reading their poems with abrupt pauses at the end of each line, but this is an oral stratagem that seems to have little connection with the actual dynamics of the poem. Denise Levertov has gone further by developing her concept of "organic form," which appears, however, to be incompletely worked out at this stage.<sup>2</sup> Like her, Lowell has preferred to work on the page, i.e., within the poem's prosodic structure; but with indifferent success in many instances. Conceivably such a simple matter as this, which is nevertheless extremely important in terms of Lo-

<sup>2</sup> Miss Levertov assumes a base in Charles Olson's "projective verse," of course, but to my mind Olson's ideas are even more unfulfilled (and unfulfillable).

well's natural style, lies behind his recent return to more exact, or more exacting, meters.

But that is a topic for another discussion. What I am interested in here is something prior to poetry. Before a man can create a poem he must create a poet. Considered from the limited perspective of artistry, this is the primal creative act.

Imagine Lowell seated at his work-table on some ordinary morning in 1950. *Lord Weary's Castle* has been out for four years; already its triumph is a burden. The poems in *The Mills of the Kavanaughs*, now at the press, have been finished for a year or more, and are beginning to slip into the past, to seem stale, remote, and incidental—like the verses of one's friends. Now I have no idea what Lowell would be doing in such circumstances, probably brooding and daydreaming like the rest of us, but for the moment let me ascribe to him a simple, orderly, godlike self-mastery that neither he nor you nor I nor Charles de Gaulle can claim in actuality. In 1950, given that marvelous perspicacity, he would have had to ask himself two questions. In essence, what is my theme? In general, what is my defect?

One does not ask these questions once and then go on to something else, one asks them over and over, as one asks all unanswerable questions. A serious poet moves progressively toward his essential theme, though he can never reach it, by means of exclusions, peeling away, from poem to poem, the inessential, working down to bedrock; and he examines every word he writes for clues to his defect. In the case of Lowell we cannot doubt that he works in such a state of constant tension and self-interrogation. Yet it seems clear to me, even so, that at some point around 1950 he must have asked these questions with special intentness. Nothing else can account for the change of poetic stance so strikingly evident in *Life Studies*.

What had Lowell set out to do in his first poems? He had set out explicitly, I think, though ingenuously, to build on the Donne-to-Hopkins tradition of devotional poetry in English, to write poems of faith. The evidence, in the poems themselves, is unmistakable. Consequently he had produced a rather large number of set pieces in a high style, such as the poems about Jonathan Edwards and other historical figures or events, affirming a public, devotional aspiration. This is what all young poets do, isn't it?

They begin, or at least they try to begin, where the mature poets they admire left off. They do this in the compulsion of their literary zeal, in spite of the evident unfeasibility of it, owing to the irremediable disparity of experience. At the same time Lowell interspersed among his devotional pieces various autobiographical elements, usually disguised and highly wrought, set out in the same taut, allusive, difficult style as the rest, but genuine autobiography nevertheless. I think it must have become evident to him by 1950 that in spite of the very great but purely literary success of the devotional set pieces, these autobiographical poems were the more alive, the more interesting, and ultimately the more comprehensible.

Poems like "Mr. Edwards and the Spider" and "After the Surprising Conversions" are good specimens of their kind, but like all their kind they are sententious. That is to say, a large part of their meaning is a stable and predictable element of the general cultural situation, with which the poems are, so to speak, invested. (And under "meaning" I intend the entire affective and cognitive experience of the poem.) But the autobiographical poems or partly autobiographical poems, like "Mary Winslow" and "At the Indian Killer's Grave," work themselves out in their own terms, within their own language; and in spite of the high gloss of artifice that remains upon them, they speak with urgency.

All this is even more evident today, fifteen years later. The most prominent motifs of the poems in *Lord Weary's Castle* are the Christ, the Crucifix, and the Virgin; they are repeated on almost every page. Yet they remain inert. They are not personal realizations, they are not symbols, they are merely tokens (which perhaps, in the tradition Lowell had chosen, is all they can be). The personal motifs, on the other hand—personal guilt, personal death, personal time, personal violence and desire—are what carry the poet along, and they are connected, not with devotional aspirations, but with his experienced life. He returns to them again and again in poems about himself, about his mother and the Winslow family, and about his father, Commander Lowell. In *Life Studies* he simply relinquished one set of motifs, the former, and took up the other. The resulting augmentation of his poetic stature—his personal stature as creator within the domain of his poetic materials—was enormous.

As I say, Lowell cannot discover the precise specifications of his theme, which is lucky for him. If he were to do so, he would be clapped into silence instantly. Nor can we do it for him, which is equally lucky. All we can do is brood, as he does, over his lines and the shadows behind them, tracking down the motifs to see where they lead. In my own recent brooding I turn especially to two lines from the poem called "Night Sweat" in *For the Union Dead*:

always inside me is the child who died,  
always inside me is his will to die . . .

Simple enough; explicit enough. They are one expression of the radical guilt which seems to lie at the base of Lowell's poetic nature. It is a guilt which took form like any other, leaving aside psychoanalytical factors: first from elements of generalized cultural guilt, in Lowell's case the New Englander's shame over the Indians and the Salem women, which has exercised an obviously powerful influence on his imagination; then from guilt that all men feel, with deep necessity, for the deaths of their own fathers; and finally from the horrendous events of contemporary history. But what is the punishment for the crimes that produce this pervading guilt? It is personal death. We all know this, from the first moment of our mortal recognition. Yet against this Lowell casts again and again his instinctive belief in the remission of sin, or rather his knowledge, his feeling, of his own undiminished innocence. Then what can our death be? What is our guilt? There is only one answer, outside of absurdity. Our death is our sin, for which we pay in advance through our guilt. Our death is a crime against every good principle in the universe: nature, God, the human heart. Yet we, the innocent, are the responsible ones—this is the idea Lowell cannot forego. We carry this crime, like a seed, within us. Our bodies are going to commit it, do what we will. They are going to carry out this murder, inexorably, while we stand by, helpless and aghast.

This is the ultimate Yankee metonymy, you might say. Puritan death as punishment for sin contracts, under the paradox of benign Transcendentalism, to death as sin. Naturally it is a theological monstrosity. It is impossible. Yet in the human and poetic sphere, it is a validity of staggering force.

Well, all this is highly conjectural, of course. There are scores of other, doubtless better ways to approach Lowell's theme, I'm sure. Yet I feel this progressive identification of sin, guilt, and death can be traced fairly directly from such poems as "At the Indian Killer's Grave" to "Night Sweat" and beyond. The two lines I have quoted strike close to it. They are literal. When Lowell says "inside" I think he means inside: he is carrying this sin-death around in him like a monstrous illegitimate pregnancy. I would almost bet that if he suffers the common nightmare of artists, the dream of male parturition, it is a dead thing that comes out (at which point, if he hasn't awakened, his dream may be suffused with bliss).

Meanwhile Lowell has his defect, for which he should give thanks. It permits him to relax into the mercy of technical self-criticism. Not that it is easy to deal with; quite the contrary. Like all fundamental defects, it is a function of his personality, and hence wears many faces. I call it the defect of pervasive extraneity; but it could have other names. One aspect of it was quite clear, however, in *Lord Weary's Castle*: the laid-on metaphysical obscurity. This was the fashion of poetry at the time, and Lowell accommodated himself to it easily and naturally; and without the least poetic infidelity. We must bear in mind in considering fashion that a fashion during the period of its ascendancy is not a fashion; it is merely what is right. In composing the poems of *Lord Weary's Castle*, Lowell had no sense, I'm certain, of doing anything but what was necessary. He had no sense of *doing* anything at all, except writing poetry as it is written. Nevertheless, the obscurity, like the ornate style and the use of inert figures from a general cultural conspectus, was clearly extraneous to his main themes and objectives, as he could see five or six years later, and he gave it up; this was his defect and he chopped off its head. But it sprang up elsewhere, hydra-like. Other aspects of it were more difficult to see. For instance, in the title poem from *The Mills of the Kavanagh's*, he had shown his inability to sustain the long units of poetry, and at the same time his great talent for the short units: the line and phrase and isolated image. These are his forte. Lowell can rap out a single sharp line with extraordinary facility. The trouble is that these brilliant strokes may contribute nothing to the whole fabric and intention of a poem; they may be merely extraneous—pervasively extraneous because

in spite of their irrelevance, they do sit within the total structure and they cannot be eradicated once the poem has acquired a certain degree of distinctness.

In a poem called "The Scream" from *For the Union Dead*, Lowell writes of the time when his mother gave up her mourning:

One day she changed to purple,  
and left her mourning. At the fitting,  
the dressmaker crawled on the floor,  
eating pins, like Nebuchadnezzar  
on his knees eating grass.

We have all seen this, of course, a woman crawling on the floor, her mouth full of pins, to adjust another woman's hem, and so we are struck by the originality of Lowell's simile. It seems to me absolutely genuine; I have never encountered it before. Hence the pins and grass collapse together spontaneously in my mind like a perfect superimposition of images. I am charmed. Only when I stop to think do I realize that Nebuchadnezzar and what he stands for have only the remotest connection with this scene, and that the dressmaker herself is a figure of no importance in the poem. As an image, this is a brilliant extraneity: the defect at work.

And what shall we say about the appearance of the new book, its crass and confused ostentation? This is gross extraneity and nothing else.

In short, Lowell's defect is a temptation to mere appearance, to effects, trappings—to the extraneous. And it arises, I believe, from a discrete imagination, i.e., an imagination which works best in disjunctive snatches. I suppose some people would call it an analytic, rather than a synthetic, imagination. His problem as a poet during the past fifteen or twenty years has been to continue digging deeper toward his essential theme, while at the same turning, if it is possible, his defect into an advantage.

So far I have been writing about Lowell as if he were an isolated case, but the reverse is the truth. He is a poet of his time. The shift of focus in his poetry has been one part, a very small part, of a general shift in artistic values and intentions during the past quarter-century.

When was the last time in our western civilization that a writer at his work-table could look at a piece of writing and call it finished, self-enclosed and self-sustaining, autonomous—a work of art in the original sense? I'd say in poetry it must have been at the time of Pope, and in fiction, since the novel lags behind, perhaps as late as Flaubert or Turgenev; but actually no one could draw the lines so precisely. The change from one notion of art to another was very gradual. All we can say with certainty is that sometime during the nineteenth century—that changeful time!—the old idea of the enclosed work of art was dislocated in the minds of serious artists: Heine, Rimbaud, Strindberg. Such men began to see that art is always unfinished; and from this arose the concept of its a priori unfinishability, i.e., its limitlessness. For a time—quite a time—the two concepts ran side-by-side; many artists tried by various means to combine them. In the forefront of our century, for instance, we got the idea of the circularity of artistic structure, from which derived the work of art that was both limitless and enclosed: *The Waste Land* and *Finnegans Wake*. These were grandiose conceptions. They made art into something it had not been before, a world in itself.<sup>3</sup> They were helped along by the general collapse of values in the post-Nietzschean cultures of Europe. Some artists, despairing of their own painful nihilism, even tried to substitute for the reality of the world the anti-reality of art—or of style, the word, or whatever—believing that only by this means could they create a bearable plane upon which to enact human existence and build a consistent scheme of values. I am thinking of such men as Gottfried Benn, Céline, and Wyndham Lewis, or in a different way of Breton and the Surréalistes. Of course Hitler's war smashed all that, proving the ugliness and irresponsibility of it. Reality was reality after all. We came out of the war badly shaken, clinging to the idea of existential engagement. Henceforth, contrite as we were, we would be responsible and free, creative within the real world. Yet what could this mean in a reality over which we had no control, a reality in which we, the conscious element, possessed nothing but the lunatic knowledge of our own super-

<sup>3</sup> An extreme statement; in one sense art had always been a world apart. But in another the enclosed and limitless masterpieces of 1910-1940 did raise the possibility of an art that was not only distinct from "objective reality" but contradictory; thus engendering a philosophical departure far more serious than the shallow Yellow-Book estheticism from which it partly sprang.

erogation, to use Auden's terms? If anti-reality were denied us by our own responsibility, and if reality were denied us by our own alienation, what could we create? We decided—and to my mind the inevitability of it is beautiful—that what we could create was life. Human life.

It was not a retreat to anti-reality. In looking back we saw that, after Nietzsche, we had been living in a crisis of intellectual evolution, a terrible blockage and confusion; we had been absorbing what Jaspers calls "the preparing power of chaos." Now we were ready to go forward. Now, in freedom and responsibility, we began to see the meaning of what we had known all along, that a life is more than a bundle of determined experiential data. (For the biggest horror of our crisis had been the complex but empty enticements of Freudian positivism.) A life is what we make it. In its authenticity it is our own interpretation and re-organization of experience, structured metaphorically. It is the result of successive imaginative acts—it is a work of art! By conversion, a work of art is life, *provided it be true to the experiential core*. Thus in a century artists had moved from an Arnoldian criticism of life to an Existential creation of life, and both the gains and the losses were immense.

The biggest loss perhaps was a large part of what we thought we had known about art. For now we saw in exactly what way art is limitless. It is limitless because it is free and responsible: it is a life. Its only end is the adventitious cutting off that comes when a heart bursts, or a sun. Still, the individual "piece" of art must be objective in some sense; it lies on the page, on the canvas. Practically speaking, what is a limitless object? It is a fragment; a random fragment; a fragment without intrinsic form, shading off in all directions into whatever lies beyond. And this is what our art has become in the past two decades: random, fragmentary, and open-ended.

Hence in literature any particular "work" is linear rather than circular in structure, extensible rather than terminal in intent, and at any given point inclusive rather than associative in substance; at least these are its tendencies. And it is autobiographical, that goes without saying. It is an act of self-creation by an artist within the tumult of experience.

This means that many of our ideas about art must be re-examined and possibly thrown out. I have in mind not our ideas



of technique, derived from the separate arts, but our esthetic generalizations derived from all the arts. Such notions as harmony, dynamism, control, proportion, even style in its broadest sense. How do these criteria apply to a work which is not a work at all, conventionally considered, but a fragment? I do not say they do not apply; I say the applications must be radically re-determined.

As readers, where does this leave us? In a mere subjective muddle? Sometimes it seems so. For that matter, why should we read another person's poems at all? Our life is what concerns us, not his. Is he a better observer than we, a better imaginer, a better creator? Can his self-creation of his life assist us in ours, assuming a rough equivalence of human needs and capacities? Perhaps; but these too are subjective criteria. What then?

All I can say is that the most progressive criticism we have now *is* subjective, resolutely so and in just these ways. It asks what a poem can *do* for us. The reason we have so little of it is that we are unused to such methods and fearful of them, and we do not know upon what principles to organize them. Our critics are years behind our artists, still afraid of the personal, ideal, moral, and contingent. For strangely enough, these four qualities are just what we preserve in fragments but destroy in wholes. Working philosophers know this. In a grave correspondence to human limits, an apothegm is better philosophy than an organon.

Still, I see some evidence, here and there, that the critics are beginning to stir themselves.

What Lowell thinks of all this he hasn't said. He has written almost no criticism, and apparently does not intend to write any. I salute him! But at all events we know that he has been working for twenty years in the heart of the movement I have described, among eastern writers and artists. He has been associated with the painters who gave their work the unfortunate names of abstract expressionism and action painting, and with theatrical people who have used such concepts as the happening and non-acting acting; these being half-understood designations for the artist's life-constructing function. This has been Lowell's milieu. Of course he has shared it with many other writers; what I have been discussing in terms of Lowell's work is a shift or tightening of artistic intention which cuts across every line. And one thing

more is certain. Whatever the rationale, or whether or not there is any rationale, we cannot read Lowell's autobiographical writing, from *Life Studies* to *Near the Ocean*, without seeing that we are in touch with a writer who is in fact making his life as he goes along, and with a degree of seriousness and determination and self-awareness that surpasses the artistic confidence of any previous generation. He has resolved to accept reality, all reality, and to take its fragments indiscriminately as they come, forging from them this indissoluble locus of metaphoric connections that is known as Robert Lowell. No wonder he is enthusiastic.

Hence we see that in his translations, and for that matter in all his work, Lowell's methods are distinct from those of Ezra Pound. This is a distinction we must be careful to draw, I think, because Pound's methods have become so much second-nature to us all that they blur our recognition of the principal fact about the two poets, viz. that the historical gulf separating them is enormous. Thus when Pound wrenches and distorts Propertius in the translations from the *Elegies*, or when he capsulates writing from many sources in the *Cantos*, he does so in the interest of a general program of cultural aggrandisement conducted from a base of personal security. There is no uncertainty of values in the *Cantos*; in this respect the poem is as old-fashioned as *Candide* or Boethius. Nor is there any uncertainty of poetic personality. The writer—"ego, scriptor"—is a steady and reliable, if sometimes rudimentary, presence. Pound's work, in effect, is an Arnoldian criticism of life on a very grand scale, which is only possible because the critic looks out from the secure bastion of his own personality founded on a stable scheme of values. Lowell, on the other hand, is a poetic ego without fixtures: in a sense neither being nor becoming, but a sequence of fragments, like the individual frames of a movie film, propelled and unified by its own creative drive. This does not mean that Lowell's work lacks values; his poems are as strenuously moral as anyone's. But his objective is not critical, nor even broadly cultural; it is personal; and the moral elements of his poetry are used, not as precepts, but as the hypotheses of an experimental venture in self-validation. In his autobiographical work, both translations and original poems, Lowell employs many of Pound's devices, perhaps most of them, but his ends are his own—and this makes all the difference. It means a

radically different creative outlook, issuing in new poetic justifications and criteria.

And so I return to my starting-place; for I am sure everyone knows that the hypothetical reviewer with whom I began is really myself, and that all this speculation springs from the moment when my review copy of *Near the Ocean* arrived in the mail. I have already said that I do not like the sequence of autobiographical poems which forms the heart of this new book. Let me add to this three further points.

1. Why has Lowell moved progressively away from the simplicity of *Life Studies* toward a new formalism? Is it only a reversionary impulse? Is it an attempt to give greater objectivity to the random, fragmentary materials of his autobiography by re-introducing elements of fixative convention? Is it from a desire to make fuller use of his talent, i.e., to turn his defect to advantage by emphasizing prosody and syntax? No doubt all these reasons, and others, are at work. But the result is a too great concentration of effort upon the verbal surface—to my mind very unfortunate. We now have poems which are compositions of brilliant minutiae, like mosaics in which the separate tiles are so bright and glittering that we cannot see the design. A mosaic is fine, it is the model *par excellence* for poetry in our time, but if we are to see the pattern, the separate pieces must be clear and naturally arranged; and in the best mosaics the colors are subdued rather than gaudy.

2. In point of substance I ask, still in a firmly subjective mode: what are the most useful parts of autobiography? To my mind the most interesting of Lowell's poems are those from his present, concerning his wife, divorce, children, illness, etc., but these are few and small compared to the great number about his youth and childhood, his ancestors, his visits to the family graveyard. I detect a faint odor of degenerate Freudian sentimentalism. Have we not had enough of this, and more? We are interested in the man, the present, unfinished, lively being. If the term "confessional" is to be applied to Lowell's work, although I have said why I think it is inadequate, then I suggest he has not confessed enough. In particular one topic is lacking, unless I am mistaken: his conversion to the Church of Rome and his subsequent—should I say recusancy? I hardly know. He was in and then he

was out, and the rest for us is a mystery. Surely this touches the man. And surely it touches many issues of our time: justice, probity, the individual and the mass, the role of love in society, even peace and war. In effect, I advocate a stiffening up of autobiographical substance, a colder and more realistic view. Let the rigor now reserved for verbal superficialities be applied to the exact new content of experience.

3. But judgment fails. In this art it has not found its place. If I were to suggest one ultra-technical criterion still available to a poet in Lowell's circumstances, I would say: relevance. Be random, yes, fragmentary and open-ended—these are the conditions of life—but scrutinize every component of your act of creation for its relevance. The advantage of random observation is not only in what comes but in what is let go. Avoid the extraneous like the plague. Lowell does not always manage it, and his defect is not the advantage it might be. His style, though more deeply in-wrought than before, is still too much like a shell, a carapace, an extraneity. We see again and again that the most difficult work of imagination is not when it soars in fantasy but when it plods in fact. And what a force of imagination has gone into these poems! A man's being, fought for, fragment by fragment, there on the page: this we can recognize. And we know that in such poetry the risk of failure is no longer a risk, but a surety. It must be taken, eaten. The very poem which seems most awkward to us may be the one that will wrench us away, finally, from the esthetic fixatives of the conventions of irresponsibility, and release us into responsible creation. If we read Lowell's new poems in the light of the problems he is facing, we will know that although we must, since we are human, judge them, our judgment is not something superior or separate, it is a part of his struggle, as his struggle is a part of ours. In this knowledge we may discover what we have been groping toward for centuries: not humility, which we don't need, nor magnanimity, which I hope we already have, but the competence of human freedom.